

Swing Hard in Case You Hit It

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John McCain's decision to choose Sarah Palin as his running mate indicates that his approach to making this decision falls into the category of "Swing Hard in Case You Hit It." Clearly McCain made this decision based on being taken with the possibility, albeit a somewhat remote one, that Palin be able to somehow change the dynamics of this election and put a fresh, young, female face on what has become an increasingly older, grumpy and male Republican campaign.

The far more likely scenario is that this vice-presidential candidate who makes George H.W. Bush's running mate Dan Quayle look wise and experienced by contrast, will not connect with blue collar women and will fail to persuade voters she is ready to be president-an issue that is particularly important for Palin given the actuarial realities confronting her running mate. This is the potential downside of the choice.

In addition to being a virtual unknown, with, to paraphrase Winston Churchill's description of Clement Atlee, much to be unknown about, Palin is a social conservative, and obviously, a woman. Herein lays the potential for Palin, if everything goes well for the Republican ticket, to have a transformative effect on the race. She could, on the one hand, based on her ideological background, excite the Republican base, something that McCain has so far failed to do, while on the other hand, based on her gender, she might be able to persuade disaffected Clinton supporters and other women to vote for McCain.

The chance of Palin succeeding in both of these, seemingly contradictory, areas is quite slim. She will undoubtedly help mobilize the socially conservative Republican base, but winning over Clinton supporters will prove a much more difficult task for this anti-choice governor so transparently underprepared to serve in national office. However, if she succeeds in both these areas, she could play a decisive role in a McCain victory.

McCain's desire to add another social conservative from a western state to the ticket is in of itself interesting and revealing. There is no real geographic or even ideological balance to the Republican ticket. Both candidates come from solidly Republican states in the same region; and both share a similar socially conservative ideology. This is not altogether different from the Democratic ticket which is without anybody from the South, border states or west for only the second time since 1968, but nobody is questioning Joe Biden's qualifications or basic ability to serve as president. The Republican ticket is also different from the Clinton-Gore ticket featuring two centrist Democrats from the South, because in 1992 the South was a key swing region. Alaska and Arizona, by contrast are solidly Republican states. McCain, however, passed on numerous more qualified candidates who might have brought ideological and geographical diversity to the ticket, seemingly because he needed to shore up support among social conservatives.

This suggests to me that McCain's internal polling numbers are worse for him than the public numbers show. This is one of the only explanations for his vice presidential choice. Perhaps McCain's numbers showed that the states of the upper Midwest were for Obama even with a Tim Pawlenty on the ticket, or that even Mitt Romney's so-called economic expertise was not going to sway enough voters concerned about the economy and looking for change.

If McCain's internal numbers showed that he was running neck and neck with Obama in electoral votes, not just in the national horserace, it is hard to imagine he would have made such a risky vice presidential choice. He would have chosen a running mate who was a bit more qualified to serve as president if that became necessary, rather than one who has a slight chance of shaking up the race, but also a significant chance of being a drag on the ticket.

Because of Palin's ample weaknesses as a candidate, many Democrats are already waiting in excited anticipation to see Palin debate Joe Biden, particularly on issues of foreign policy and national security. While, the contrast between the expertise, preparedness and judgment of these two candidates could not be more stark, the bar for Palin in the one vice-presidential debate will be so low that if she pronounces her name correctly and remembers what state she is from, most of the networks will call the debate a draw and Fox will declare her the winner. Additionally, Biden will have to be careful about coming on too strong in demonstrating his expertise as he is somewhat wont to do.

The challenge for the Obama-Biden campaign is to show voters how bizarrely unqualified and ideologically conservative Sarah Palin is without being seen as bullies beating up on the nice young woman from Alaska. The Democratic campaign cannot assume that everybody is aware of how thin Palin's resume is. Nor can they assume that voters are aware of just how conservative this woman is. However, the Democrats will not be able to do this as easily as in 1988 when Dan Quayle, up until now the archetypical unqualified vice presidential candidate, was their target.